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ABSTRACT

The National Issues Forum model, a series of community based public discussions on key domestic issues, may be a partial solution to the "human gap" between growing complexity and a capacity to deal with it, by exemplifying "innovative learning." To engage in innovative learning, characterized by anticipation and participation, individuals must be able to enrich their contexts, keep up with the rapid appearance of new situations, and communicate the variety of contexts through dialogue with other individuals. The goal of this innovative learning enrichment process would be to prepare people for citizen participation in democracy, through a problem/possibility orientation toward those domestic issues likely to occur in the communications era. Teaching this problem/possibility style requires (1) involving and enlisting the cooperation of people with divergent views of a problem, (2) teaching people to state the overall issue so that all viewpoints are fairly represented, (3) challenging people with divergent views to work together to define the relevant questions and issues requiring attention, and (4) developing a network to bring together competent people for long-term involvement in the decision-making process. Adapted to the speech communication classroom, the forum model would enable students to develop a style of learning and decision-making that is appropriate for the "communications era" of the future. (HTH)

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The National Issues Forum: Bridging the Human Gap Through Innovative Learning

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As each day passes, that once foreboding but distant year, 1984, moves closer to becoming a reality. It is not surprising, therefore, that questions about "the future" are being posed in many different quarters. I do not believe, however, that the prospect of being at the threshold of 1984 is the actual source of concern expressed by those who play "the future game." Rather, their concern stems from the realization that change is occurring so rapidly that most of what people know is obsolete and from the recognition that some solution for dealing with such rapid and encompassing change must be found.

Mathews[1] articulates this problem as "a concern that citizens have become estranged from their government and the larger society it is intended to serve." Likewise, the problem is identified by the Public Agenda Foundation as "The Gap," "a problem of communication between the public and the policymakers that has contributed substantially to the average citizen's sense of powerlessness and disenfranchisement. . . ."[2] It is what William Work refers to when he warns:

> Those who have the temerity to describe our todays and our tomorrows project two alternatives for humankind: either we will develop the skills of a true participatory democracy, or we will surely slide into the abyss of autocracy and dictatorship.[3]

Perhaps the most encompassing analysis of the problem can be found in a recent report to the Club of Rome. In that report, the challenge of the future is to obliterate "the human gap" which is defined as "the distance between growing complexity and our capacity to cope with it."[4] The report

states:

> Clearly, one eternal human endeavor has been to develop additions to knowledge and improvements in action to deal with a complexity which, for most of history, derived primarily from natural phenomena. An essential difference today is that contemporary complexity is caused predominantly by human activities. We call it a human gap, because it is a dichotomy between a growing complexity of our own making and a lagging development of our own capacities.[5]

Since the human gap appears to be the result of human endeavor, surely humans also can devise a plan for eliminating that gap. Robert Theobald offers insight about the kind of solution which will be necessary when he argues that "We must find more effective ways to permit people to learn about new ideas so that they can participate in evaluating them, accepting them where this is appropriate, modifying them where this is necessary, and rejecting them where they are invalid."[6] Like Theobald, Work believes that citizens can face the challenge of becoming a true participatory democracy "only if (1) they are informed; (2) they are encouraged to share in decision-making on matters that affect their own destinies; (3) they understand the need for accommodation between their own needs and the needs of others; and (4) they have the analytical and forensic skills needed to arrive at a position and advance it persuasively."[7] In a similar vein, the report to the Club of Rome describes "how learning can bridge the human gap."[8]

My contention is that the National Issues Forum model should be viewed as

a partial solution to the problem of the human gap. I will argue (1) that the National Issues Forum exemplifies "innovative learning," the solution proposed in the report to the Club of Rome, and (2) that the National Issues Forum model, adapted to the speech communication classroom, encompasses the means to enable students to develop a style of learning and decision-making that is appropriate for the "communications era" of the future.

What is innovative learning and what are its major characteristics? Innovative learning is "the type of learning that can bring change, renewal, restructuring, and problem reformulation."[9] It has two major characteristics, "anticipation" and "participation."

Anticipation, or "anticipatory learning," is a proactive approach to problems and issues of today and tomorrow. It is a perspective which projects into the future and seeks to discover or create means for reaching desirable goals. "Its aim is to shield society from the trauma of learning by shock,"[10] a phenomenon which Theobald labels "crisis learning." Crisis learning is reactive; it is learning after the fact. "The essence of anticipation lies in selecting desirable events and working toward them; in averting unwanted or potentially catastrophic events; and in creating new alternatives. Through anticipatory learning, the future may enter our lives as a friend, not as a burglar."[11]

Participation is the second major feature of innovative learning. Above all, participatory learning implies the genuine desire to discover all points of view on an issue and a willingness to involve all citizens, regardless of their power or lack of it, in the formulation of goals and of options for reaching those goals. "Participation . . . is an attitude characterized by cooperation, dialogue, and empathy."[12]

Innovative learning, therefore, involves a combination of anticipation

and participation. It is value-laden in that it consciously focuses on grounding its positions in the prevailing values of a society. Furthermore, the dialogue which surrounds innovative learning centers on the values which underlie the problems and the solutions to the problems.

There are two requirements for engaging in innovative learning. "On the one hand, individuals have to be able to enrich their contexts, keeping up with the rapid appearance of new situations. On the other hand, they must communicate the variety of contexts through an on-going dialogue with other individuals."[13] Clearly, the National Issues Forum, sponsored by the Domestic Policy Association, has been structured in such a way that both requirements of innovative learning can be satisfied. Furthermore, the orientation of the Forum is conducive to the principles of innovative learning. Mathews' description of the Forum underscores my point:

> This is a collaborative effort to achieve an ambitious goal--to bring Americans together every year to address urgent domestic issues. . . Like the old town meetings, this series provides a forum where concerned citizens can discuss specific public issues, air their differences, think them through, and work toward acceptable solutions. . . . The Domestic Policy Association, which has organized the National Issues Forum, . . is a nonpartisan group. It does not advocate any specific solution or point of view. Its interest is in exploring, in unbiased fashion, the costs and the benefits of various alternatives, and

> making explicit the values that each of those alternatives reflect. Its goal is to identify our commonground.[14]

The search for value-oriented commonground which is intended to be used as the springboard for consideration of alternative solutions to anticipated problems is the hallmark of the National Issues Forum; and, precisely that same orientation is what leads me to suggest that the Forum is consistent with the principles of innovative learning set forth in the report to the Club of Rome. That is, the report contains a directive that "Grass roots views and opinions cannot be treated as mere feedback, but must be considered as a creative and innovative starting point."[15] The Forum has been structured to guarantee anticipatory and participatory learning on the part of citizens who are the "grass roots" of this nation. Moreover, Mathews report[16] on the first year of activities suggests that the model works. I believe that the Domestic Policy Association, through its National Issues Forum, has created an "effective pedagogy for citizen participation," a means for innovative learning which can enable citizens to engage in what Toffler[17] calls "anticipatory democracy," what Work labels "participatory democracy," and what Theobald advocates as the appropriate way to create and disseminate knowledge in the communications era--the problem/possibility style.[18] With this in mind, I turn to my second contention. The National Issues Forum can be used to enrich classroom instruction in speech communication. Through innovative learning, the goal of the enrichment process would be to prepare people for citizen participation in the spirit of those who advocate true participatory democracy. That is, the people would learn to utilize a problem/possibility orientation toward those domestic issues which will occur during the communi-

cations era.

In Beyond Despair, Robert Theobald writes about the kind of change which will be necessary for coping with the communications era:

> We are in the midst of an immensely rapid transition between the industrial era and the communications era. This transition will impose changes in our society that will be as dramatic as those that occurred two centuries ago, as we moved from the agricultural to the industrial era.
>
> The central organizing principles of the communications era can already be distinguished. We need to replace the concept of equality of results with those of diversity and pluralism. We need to change the drive for growth into an acceptance of the reality of finiteness and enoughness. We need to recognize that decision-making from the top down must be replaced by widespread opportunities for participation. We need to abandon our present competitive "we-they," "win-lose" models of the world and replace them with cooperative "win-win" understandings. . . . This means setting up new methods to involve people effectively in creative decision-making and new methods to develop and distribute knowledge.[19]

While Theobald's discussion of future-oriented change is much more grandiose than my concern here, his notion of developing a problem/possibility style for knowledge dissemination and for decision-making is pertinent. I believe that the National Issues Forum model is one means by which speech communication instructors can prepare students to participate effectively during the communications era. The Forum model contains the elements necessary for teaching a problem/possibility style.

The problem/possibility style requires: (1) the involvement and cooperation of all concerned people who have divergent views of a problem; (2) learning "to state the overall issue in such a way that all sides would feel that their viewpoints had been fairly represented;" (3) finding "ways to challenge people who hold widely divergent views to work together to define the relevant questions and issues that require attention;" and, (4) developing a network to bring together groups of competent people for long-term involvement with the decision-making process.[20]

Clearly, Mathews' earlier description of the National Issues Forum demonstrates that the Forum fulfills the definitional criteria of the problem/possibility style.[21] In addition, available evidence suggests that the models works. The success of the Florida Governor's Challenge Program is testimony to the regional success of the Forum model.[22] Mathews has just testified to the successful implementation of the model on a national basis. It would appear that imagination is the only additional ingredient required in order to utilize the National Issues Forum as a means for preparing students to develop a style of thinking and communicating which is appropriate for a true participatory democracy.

Thomas Jefferson once wrote:

> I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it away from them, but to inform their discretion by education.[23]

By including the Forum model as one element of speech communication instruction, the discipline of speech communication could be instrumental in bridging the human gap through innovative learning, thus, preparing citizens for 1984 and beyond.

NOTES

[1] David Mathews, "The Domestic Policy Association: A Test of Public Communication," Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, Washington, D.C., November 1983, 1.

[2] Mathews, 7.

[3] William Work, "Communication Education for the Twenty-First Century," Communication Quarterly, 30 (Fall 1982), 267.

[4] James W. Botkin, Mahdi Elmandjra, and Mircea Malitza, No Limits to Learning: Bridging the Human Gap (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1979), p. 6.

[5] Botkin, et al., pp. 6-7.

[6] Robert Theobald, Beyond Despair (Cabin John, Md.: Seven Locks Press, Inc., 1981), p. 126.

[7] Work, "Communication Education," 267.

[8] Botkin, et al., No Limits to Learning, p. 8.

[9] Botkin, et al., p. 10.

[10] Botkin, et al., p. 13.

[11] Botkin, et al., p. 13.

[12] Botkin, et al., p. 13.

[13] Botkin, et al., p. 24.

[14] David Mathews, "Introduction," National Issues Forum Booklet (Dayton, Ohio: Domestic Policy Association, 1982).

[15] Botkin, et al., No Limits to Learning, p. 82.

[16] Mathews, "The Domestic Policy Association."

[17] Alvin Toffler, "What is Anticipatory Democracy," The Futurist, October, 1975, p. 224.

[18] Theobald, Beyond Despair, p. 126.

[19] Theobald, pp. xviii-xix.

[20] Theobald, pp. 126-127.

[21] Mathews, "The Domestic Policy Association."

[22] Eva M. McMahan, Barbara Barker, and Annabel D. Hagood, "A Report on the Research and Evaluation Component of the 1981 Florida Governor's Challenge Program," Evaluation of 1981 Florida Governor's Challenge Program, Research Report No. 9. The University of Alabama School of Communication, 1982.

[23] Quoted in The National Issues Forum Booklet (Dayton, Ohio: Domestic Policy Association, 1982).